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Situating Suicide as an Anthropological Problem: Ethnographic Approaches to Understanding Self-Harm and Self-Inflicted Death

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More than a century after Durkheim's sociological classic placed the subject of suicide as a concern at the heart of social science, ethnographic, cross-cultural analyses of what lie behind people's attempts to take their own lives remain few in number. But by highlighting how the ethnographic method privileges a certain view of suicidal behaviour, we can go beyond the limited sociological and psychological approaches that define the field of 'suicidology' in terms of social and psychological 'pathology' to engage with suicide from our informants' own points of view – and in so doing cast the problem in a new light and new terms. In particular, suicide can be understood as a kind of sociality, as a special kind of social relationship, through which people create meaning in their own lives. In this introductory essay we offer an overview of the papers that make up this special issue and map out the theoretical opportunities and challenges they present.

A problem of enduring human interest

Suicide is a problem of enduring human interest, forcing us to ask questions about ourselves and our world that other human behaviours do not. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO),¹ every year almost one million people across the globe die from suicide, equating to one such death every forty seconds. Over the past half century reported suicide rates around the world have risen 60 per cent and, based on current trends, the WHO projects suicides will rise to 1.53 million yearly by 2020. It is estimated, furthermore, that

¹ See: http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/index.html

between ten and twenty times the number of people who commit suicide, *attempt* suicide – working out at an average of one case every three seconds – making deliberate self-harm, too, a major health and social concern. At the global level, men outnumber women considerably in terms of completed suicides, while women outnumber men in terms of attempted suicides. Suicidal risk rises across the life-course, especially for men between the ages of 15 and 54, and after 75 years. The data also suggests that suicide rates are not contingent on levels of socio-economic development, with some of the highest rates found in developed countries such as Scandinavia, parts of Northern Europe, and Japan, and some of the lowest in parts of Central and Southern America and West Asia.

Beyond these ‘headline’ facts and figures, suicidal behaviour exists as a subject of ongoing public concern, and features regularly in the national and international news. There is of course a massive amount of attention paid to ‘suicide bombing,’² and debates around euthanasia, most recently heralded by Switzerland’s vote in May 2011 against ‘suicide tourism,’ offer a continuous backdrop. So too do ‘suicide clusters’ and ‘suicide epidemics’ grab our attention – the thirty-odd deaths of young people, some of whom were friends, in and around the Welsh town of Bridgend in 2008; the Foxconn factory suicides in China in 2010, when thirteen workers assembling Apple iPods jumped to their deaths from the roof of the premises; the youth suicides said to have sparked the so-called ‘Jasmine Revolution’ in Tunisia at end of 2010 and which foreshadowed uprisings across Arab nations; and the longer-running stories of ‘farmer suicides’ across South Asia, which are popularly (and probably wrongly – see Parry 2012) assumed to account for the reason why those countries report such high suicide rates. Meanwhile, fictionalised depictions of threatened and actual self-harm have been a staple of the arts, both within Western traditions as well as across the

² An act which, it has been argued, might not be considered suicide at all, particularly by those who perform it. Don Handelman (2008), who has explored this phenomenon in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, opts instead for the term ‘self-exploders’ for precisely this reason.

globe. Trading off what we consider to be a ‘common human empathy’ (see below) for the suicide victim, the chosen death of Shakespeare’s tragic Juliet has as much resonance for us today as it did for theatre audiences four centuries ago. When in 1774 Goethe wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a tale about a man who killed himself over an unrequited love, the first known examples of ‘media-inspired’ copycat cases ensued, with a spate of romantically disappointed young men across Europe doing away with themselves.

Camus (1955:3) famously wrote that ‘[th]ere is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest...come afterward’. Although some people, and perhaps a great many, would disagree with his sentiment, it remains the case that suicide, in one way or another, is a subject that affects us all, and about which we all have something to say. Suicidal behaviour raises serious questions about and challenges to the understanding of both human nature and human culture, seemingly existing as a fundamental negation of each. Suicide in this sense is not then just a philosophical problem – anthropology, too, in its broadest sense is a project that concerns itself with the kinds of questions that ordinary people ask about themselves and the world (Bloch 2005). And what greater questions are people faced with than when confronted with the possibility of their own voluntary death, or the chosen death of a person they love? The suicide or attempted suicide of somebody’s lover, child, or friend can be an experience that is impossible to reconcile. Questions of existence, survival, and coping such as these, whether one agrees with Camus or not, are surely crucial for human beings everywhere, and go straight to the centre of anthropological enquiry.

Yet more than a century after Durkheim wrote his sociological classic, *Suicide* (1951), and placed the subject as a concern at the heart of social science, ethnographic, cross-cultural analyses of what lie behind people’s attempts to take their own lives remain few in number.

This special edition comes at the end of a century of sporadic anthropological interest in suicidal behaviour, building on the groundwork established by scholars such as Malinowski (1949) and Bohannan and colleagues (1960), but also going much further. Focusing on the act in its more ‘everyday’ occurrences while speaking to issues of ‘protest’ and ‘escape’ (that also have resonances for our understanding of ‘suicide bombing’ and euthanasia), it attempts to mark out a distinctive theoretical approach that draws from long term ethnographic research (and related kinds of ‘ethnographic seeing’ – Wolcott 1999) conducted in diverse locations across the globe, including Mexico, Canada, England, South Africa, Palestine, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Japan. By highlighting how the ethnographic method privileges a certain view of the subject, we aim to go beyond the sociological and psychological approaches that define the field of ‘suicidology’ to engage with suicide from our informants’ own points of view – and in so doing cast the problem in a new light and new terms.

At the centre of the volume is a tension – irresolvable, we feel, but crucial for that very reason – between the human universality and cultural specificity of suicide. It exists as an at once immediately recognisable yet contextually particularistic phenomenon, both amenable to and resisting cross-cultural definition. Even the idea of suicide itself is both clear and susceptible to slippage, as there is no obvious line between where ‘suicide’ ends and ‘risk-taking’ behaviour or wilful ‘self-neglect’ begins (Firth 2000). While each article in the volume demonstrates how the understandings and meanings of suicidal behaviour vary between and within communities and societies, as a collection they also highlight how what might be classified as suicidal behaviour poses a common human *problem* – a problem that seems to go to the heart of human sociality (Widger 2009), and of how the lives we lead are defined, experienced, and created. At the centre of this is the understanding of suicide as a kind of social relationship in its own right – as a vehicle by which people do not simply

threaten or end their own lives but come to understand their own lives, and the world around them. There is, we argue, something highly empathetic (in the sense that it relates to people's emotional relationships with others) as well as emphatic about suicide, and in this volume we propose that suicide should not simply be understood as a destructive act, but as a constitutive one as well.

By showcasing the value of ethnographic research into suicide, we hope to raise interest and awareness of the subject within anthropology, while making an anthropological contribution to the broader field of suicidology. Although taking a critical stance towards some of the most basic assumptions made by sociologists and psychologists who dominate the field, we nevertheless see our engagement with them as one of mutual exchange and learning rather than only confrontation – and for that reason are especially delighted to include contributions by scholars other than anthropologists, including psychologists and practicing psychiatrists, who have interests in ethnography and in exploring suicide at the intersections of our disciplines. Together, we have a concern to contribute to the development of more effective treatment and prevention programmes, and of our work being useful in a practical sense as well as shaping the growth of intellectual thought. One of the most basic ways of doing this is by showing how ‘culture,’ as it is often spoken about in suicidology, is not a monolithic entity,³ and nor, worse still, is it something that only ‘non-Westerner’s’ have. In fact, we have tried to steer clear of blind-alley discussions of ‘culture’ at all, focusing instead on the close relational and social structural contexts and conditions within and under which suicidal behaviours arise and meanings grow, across diverse settings. For

³ For example, while presenting an interesting ‘round-up’ of cultural views of suicide from across the world, Farberow’s (1975) edited volume, *Suicide in Different Cultures*, is based on research drawn from questions such as ‘What has been the historical cultural attitude toward suicide in your country?’, ‘How has the cultural background of your country influenced the form and frequency of suicide?’ and so on (p. xiv). As such they very problematically equate culture with country – as something geographically bounded – and do not assume internal variations within particular locale. Although in this volume we do deal with ‘popular’ ideas of suicide, they are always situated within the broader interests and ideas of the social groups or classes expressing them, as must any competent social analysis.

these reasons, we have tried to make the volume clear and accessible for a non-anthropological readership, and hope by doing so to encourage future debate and exchange.

We begin, then, by setting out our rationale for ordering the essays that constitute this volume in the way that we have. Rather than delineating abstract theoretical and ethnographic concerns ahead of outlining the contents of the papers, we draw on those papers throughout the remainder of this introduction, taking an approach that mirrors the structure of the volume of the whole. First, we discuss in broad terms the ways in which definitions and understandings of suicide have been created, before moving to look at close quarters how people in different contexts have made sense of those categories (or constituted their own). Although such emic perspectives tend to focus on the perspectives of those who commit suicide – or at least on what their intentions might have been – meaning-making continues, in many cases, long after the suicides in question, and in the subsequent section we discuss how social groups attempt to regain control, limiting or changing the impact felt by particular suicide acts. While these sections aim to develop the theoretical arguments that underpin the volume by drawing on the synergies between each of the papers, the final section turns to consider some of the very specific methodological concerns that arise in conducting an ethnography of suicide, and explores how our contributors have dealt with them.

Let us start here by attempting to situate suicide as an anthropological concern.

Situating suicide as an anthropological problem

There are, of course, several ways in which the collection might be ordered, and in outlining a rationale for the one we have chosen it should be clear, from the outset, that we are not implying a simple linear trajectory along which ideas about suicide might be plotted. Suicidal acts, as the papers show, are as much a beginning as an end, and in that sense it might be more logical to order the papers in a circle than a straight line. Given the boundaries of a print

journal format, however, it did seem to make sense to highlight connections between the papers and to order them in such a way that, collectively, they might say more than the sum of their parts, or at least provoke readers to think about – and challenge – notions of suicide in ways that they might otherwise not. It also enables us to highlight the very different angles from which a topic as diverse as suicide might be approached anthropologically. Our scheme begins, then, with essays that, despite their ethnographic specificity, also set the wider scope for the special issue by problematising the official categories and stereotypes through which most of us, scholars included, come to understand the events and processes defined as suicide. The second batch of essays takes us on an ethnographic tour through Mexico, Afghanistan, Inuit Canada, Palestine, and South Africa – in each case offering fine-grained accounts of how suicides are made sense of in those places, illuminating – in classical anthropological fashion – how in our differences we are, as human groups, also strikingly similar. The final set of papers draw on research from locations as diverse as the UK, Singapore, and Japan, and shift our focus from the suicidal act and the events that precede it to the aftermath, exploring how those left behind continue to reinvent the meanings given to deaths caused by suicide and to find ways of living with the consequences, during which they may ‘contain’ the impacts of suicide on themselves, others, and society more broadly.

Situating suicide ethnographically

The volume begins at the start of the figurative circle we draw, with the creation of definitions and meanings of suicidal behaviour by ordinary people. There is a tyranny in the language of suicide studies that seems to prevent us thinking beyond the narrow confines of suicide as ‘an act of self-destruction.’ The term ‘suicide’ was coined in the seventeenth century, taken from the Latin *sui* (of oneself) and *caedes* (murder) (Minois 1999: 182). It passed into English usage first, then into French, and by the next century Spanish, Italian, and

Portuguese (ibid: 183). Prior to that, the terms ‘self-murder’ and ‘self-homicide’ were used instead, phrases which more directly than suicide, to those unversed in Latin, spoke of the moral reprehensibility of the act.

The Sanskrit derived term *aatmahatya* – which, as Staples and Chua concur, is in common usage across regional languages in India – also translates as ‘self-killing’ but, like suicide, is somewhat removed from the moral implications of its literal translation. Discussions with our contributors suggested comparable terms were used in other parts of the world, too: the Dari phrase *khod kochi kardan* – used by Billaud’s informants in Afghanistan – or the Japanese *jisatsu*, the most widely used Japanese term, both translate as ‘self killing.’ So too does the Northern Sotho phrase *go ipolaya*, used by those Niehaus worked with in South Africa. In Palestine, Dabbagh tells us, the Arabic word for suicide is *al-intihar*. The root verb is *nahara*, which literally means ‘to slaughter,’ usually an animal. The form *intahara* means ‘to slaughter oneself,’ and also to ‘commit suicide.’ This is as opposed to *ash-shahadeh*, which is the word for martyrdom. A martyr is a *shaheed* from the word *shahad*, which means to ‘see’ or ‘witness’ and refers to being a ‘witness’ as in being a witness to the Truth (of Allah). Thus, there is a clear distinction between ‘suicide’ on the one hand, and ‘martyrdom’ on the other.

Despite the apparent confluence of terminology across languages, however, there would appear to be greater variation in how acts that might be categorized as suicide are spoken about on the ground. In Sri Lanka, for example, although the phrase *siya diivināsā ganimā* (‘to take one’s own life’) is sometimes used, those Widger worked with talked much more often about suicidal behaviour in terms of its most common method: self-poisoning. Reflecting this, the phrases *wāha bonnāva* (drinking poison) and *kānēru bonnava* (drinking [swallowing] *kānēru*) are used. The allusion to poison is important; beyond reflecting the preferred method of suicidal behaviour, it highlights an integral ambiguity between intention,

action, and outcome. To ‘drink poison’, in other words, blurs the lines between self-harm, protest, and suicide. The same thing happens, Billaud suggests, in Afghanistan, where the term *zor khordan* – to eat or swallow poison – is also part of the lexicon, and Niehaus reports that *thlema* – to suffocate or hang – is sometimes the preferred term in northern Sotho. In Japan, too, Picone finds evidence of a rich vocabulary beyond the most common or official terminology, such as the medieval terms – still drawn upon – of *speppuku* (belly cutting) and *junshi* (a form of loyalty death, inflicted on oneself after the death of one’s feudal lord – comparable, perhaps, to the now illegal self-immolation of women after the deaths of their husbands in India, widely known as *sati*). There are additional Japanese terms for different forms of suicide – *ikka shinju*, for example, is used when a man kills his wife and his children and then himself – while other terms, as in the Sri Lankan and Afghan examples, reference the specific act rather than the death that might result from it.

In each of these contexts, as well as across European history, there has been a long debate amongst the intelligentsia – the religious scholars, moralists, philosophers, and administrators – concerning the proper meaning of suicide. In Europe, especially, acts of self-murder were variously regarded as affronts to God, natural law, or society, and thus a criminal act. This was the case especially for the lower classes, whose bodies were dragged through the streets, executed, and buried in un-consecrated ground, while the upper classes had the possibility of a noble suicide on the battlefield or in a duel (Minois 1999). Although popular understandings of suicide have of course varied across social groups and classes as well as the unique circumstances of any individual case, the fact that suicide has been, until relatively recently, a criminal act in the majority of Western countries, shaped formal approaches to the subject, including academic approaches.

As a result, in many ways suicide and homicide have been understood as different sides of the same behavioural coin – an understanding which, as shown by Chua and Widger

in the opening papers of this volume, was exported to Europe's colonies. The roots of sociological and psychological analyses of suicidal behaviour have rested on this assumption, and have been applied, seemingly, without questioning first whether such thinking is a universal given. Durkheim wrote about the link between suicide and homicide, and the relationship was later taken up in the 'frustration-aggression' hypothesis (see Dollard *et al* 1939; Berkowitz 1969), proponents of which argued that suicide was the consequence of anger turned inwards, and murder of anger turned outwards. The theory itself had roots in Freud's (2005) theory of melancholia, which proposed much the same kind of thing, and filtered through to later psychological works (see Menninger 1972). It also formed the justification for Bohannan's (1960) groundbreaking volume, *Homicide and Suicide in Africa*, wherein it is not always entirely clear whether the groups being studied themselves thought of the two as being necessarily of the same kind.

Although later psychological analyses dropped any particular discussion of the relationship between suicide and homicide – for example Beck's (1991) now dominant cognitive theory – its legacy remains within suicide studies. Suicide, like homicide, is seen as being pathological, in a social and, or, psychological, sense. While suicidologists led the charge against removing legal sanctions against suicidal behaviour, it is still regarded, nonetheless, as being the product of a disrupted external or internal state – be it 'society' at large or 'the mind' specifically.

For Durkheim, suicide in nineteenth century Europe was seen as being nothing short of a malady of a broken, egoistical and anomic society, in which the individual both rejects and was failed by the social. '[T]he suicide of sadness, is an endemic state among civilised peoples' he wrote in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1933: 191). 'On the maps of suicide it can be seen that the central region of Europe is occupied by a huge dark patch which extends between the 47th and 57th degree of latitude and between the 20th and 40th degree of

longitude.’ That dark patch was created by the fragmenting nature of a modernising society, through the cracks of which people fell as they lost the support of traditional social moorings and the sense of belonging and security that came with them. Although Durkheim also wrote about altruistic suicide, which can be understood as a kind of suicide that, unlike homicide, actually embraces and constitutes the social, he limited it to circumstances in which levels of social integration were very high – for the most part found in non-Western, so-called primitive societies.

In psychology, however, it has been the pathology of the individual that has garnered attention, with suicidal behaviour considered perhaps the most tragic manifestation of troubled minds. ‘Even though I know that each suicidal death is a multifaceted event,’ wrote Shneidman (1996: 5), one of America’s leading suicidologists, ‘I retain the belief that, in the proper distillation of the event, its essential nature is *psychological*.’ Echoing this, Williams (2001: 139), one of Britain’s most renowned suicide specialists, argued that ‘[s]uicidal behaviour is best seen as a cry of pain – a response elicited by this situation of [cognitive] entrapment – and only secondarily as an attempt to communicate or change people or things in the environment.’ In so doing, as Owens and Lambert (this volume) demonstrate in their ‘deep reading’ of psychological autopsies of suicides in southwest England, popular ideas and understandings of suicidal behaviour are removed from the analysis – ideas and understandings that are highly likely to shape pathways to suicidal behaviour and thus may prove crucial in developing more socially and culturally appropriate prevention and treatment strategies.

Responding to the wider problem of how official categories and stereotypes map on to actual instances of suicidal behaviours and *vice versa*, the first two papers of this special issue are concerned, among other things, with the creation and use of the wider categories – such as those of the state and transnational institutions – that define or shape how suicide is

understood, practised and classified in different contexts. Chua's paper, firstly, explores ethnographically how specific instances of what are labelled as suicides in the south Indian state of Kerala are interpreted and responded to in relation to archetypes provided by twenty four state taxonomies. These categories, in turn, also serve as pervasive shorthand for discussing wider social patterns in the state. Bodies dead from suicide are not, she argues, interpreted and mourned solely in terms of their own histories, but are read 'up' to fit, and to stand in for, aggregate trends: what she terms 'epidemic readings' of suicide. The death of, say, a student, might be categorised in ways that speak to wider issues concerning pressure on young people to achieve academically; to the problem of failed love affairs; to changed financial circumstances; and, more generally, to overriding themes – discussed *ad nauseam* in the South Indian media – of social decline.

As Chua also demonstrates, however (and this is something that comes across strongly in many of the other papers, too), the extent to which families are constrained or enabled by those taxonomies in making sense of deaths presumed to be suicides varies considerably depending on social position, defined, among other things, in relation to class and gender. The middle class relatives of a student found dead, for example, were able to argue *against* the suicide verdict on the basis that his circumstances failed to fit the state's rigid classifications of causalities. He was doing well academically; he was not involved with a girl or suffering unrequited love; and he was financially well-positioned – ergo, despite the circumstances in which he was found, his death could not be suicide. Conversely, a domestic servant was unable to argue that her son was murdered – a plausible explanation given his particular biography – because his death fulfilled too many of the stereotypes of suicide to be considered as anything but. Unlike the middle class family, the domestic servant also lacked the authority and the wherewithal to negotiate the system in her favour – a point which starts

to draw out social differences between people, and their capacities to manage official categories, *within* a particular ethnographic locale.

Widger's paper likewise explores how suicide stereotypes are constituted, used, and contested, both by the villagers he worked with in Sri Lanka and by the state, albeit to different ends. For the villagers, suicides were attributed to social consequences – they resulted from suffering, frustration, or anger which, ultimately, could be traced back to the quotidian realities of their daily lives. Suicide was understood as a rational response to unbearable circumstances by people who had little or no access to alternatives. As was the case in Chua's paper, however, state classifications which, on the face of it, mirror those of local people, in fact draw on grander explanatory frameworks, pathologising suicide as dysfunctional rather than a logical consequence of particular circumstances. State categories of anger, frustration and depression, unlike their emic counterparts, frame suicide in what are expressed as value-free terms that can be objectively compared across historical epochs and social groups. In fact, Widger shows, they draw specifically from sociological and psychological theories like the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Whereas Chua restricts her analysis to the particular categories of the contemporary Keralan state, Widger also illustrates how these taxonomies shift across time and across social registers: official categories took shape, in Sri Lanka, in relation to projects of the colonial and post-colonial state and, more recently, to the transnational hegemony of biomedicine and western psychiatry.

At the same time, however, for some social groups and classes formal or state discourses of suicide serve their interests as well, and the realities of suicide they purport to show do correspond in form and function with their own 'folk' theories. As Widger argues, there is no hegemony in the way that the state develops and applies suicide categories, but rather on-going processes of claim and counter-claim as they are appropriated by different people for different ends. Some people in Sri Lanka, then, will find solace in a diagnosis of

depression, while others will not. For precisely this reason it is simply not enough for anthropologists to dismiss the formal (sociological, psychological, state, or whatever) theories they encounter, but rather they need to examine more critically how etic and emic theories correspond, and *why* they correspond. This is the concern of the next five papers, which explore how specific instances of suicide are made sense of across very different contexts. In the next section we discuss the contributions of those papers against the wider context of the ethnographic endeavour, over the past century or so, to understand suicide in locally specific terms.

The efficacy of suicidal behaviour – understanding from within

As early as the late nineteenth century anthropologists were noting that suicide outside of northern Europe and (white) North America did not fit the sociological or psychological models popular at the time. Steinmetz (1894: 59), writing in the pages of *American Anthropologist*, argued that suicide was far more prevalent in ‘primitive’ societies than sociologists such as Morselli (Durkheim’s forebear) had allowed for, who considered suicide a correlate of increasing civilisation. Durkheim himself used Steinmetz to support his discussion of altruistic suicide, through which he set up his opposition of Western egoistic/anomic suicide and non-Western altruistic/fatalistic suicide.

Several decades later Malinowski published what was once considered to be ‘the best known suicide [case study] in the ethnographic literature’ (Bohannon 1960: 4). Today, it has perhaps become one of the most over-looked elements of Malinowski’s work, especially given that his ‘protest’ kind of suicide is found in various ways in so many other parts of the world. The essence of Malinowski’s argument, laid out in *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1949), was this: Durkheim and the sociologists study suicide as a measure of social integration and moral regulation, when in fact in the Trobriand Islands it exists as a social

institution in its own right. Acts of suicidal behaviour, when performed under certain conditions and when employing certain kinds of methods, are well known to act as a kind of complaint or challenge to specific others, with whom the suicidal individual is in some quarrel. By attempting or committing suicide, the individual lays blame upon those others, who by social convention the kinsmen of the suicidal person are now compelled to seek revenge upon. Thus, not only is the suicidal person absolved of his or her crime, but culpability for it, in one way or another, passes to other people.

If there could be any suspicion that such practices were particular to the Trobriand Islands, Anthony Giddens (1964) demonstrated through a brief review of other ethnographic accounts how suicide as a ‘social mechanism’ (ibid: 166) existed across American, African, and Asian societies. Similarly, Malinowski’s ‘functionalist’ account has been echoed by anthropologists working within quite different theoretical traditions. Studies published on suicide in Melanesia and Micronesia by American ‘cultural’ anthropologists (e.g. Berndt 1962; Counts 1980; Healey 1979; Johnson 1981) have repeatedly demonstrated how suicide exists as a socially legitimate means of protest when other, more ‘direct’ forms are not allowed by social convention, for example in the context of gender inequality. The same kinds of arguments have been made about suicide in China (Wolf 1975; Lee & Kleinman 2000), India (Staples 2012a, 2011b; Verrier 1943), Sri Lanka (Marecek & Senadheera 2012; Spencer 1990; Widger 2009, 2012); Peru (Brown 1986), Tikopia (2000) and many other places besides, including large swaths of East Africa (Bohannan 1960). Giddens (ibid: 116) proposed that suicide attempts in ‘modern society,’ by which one supposes he meant ‘Western’ or ‘industrialised’ societies could be read in the same way: ‘attempted suicide often does not simply represent an “unsuccessful” attempt to obtain a final release from pain or anxiety...[but] has a distinctly social character.’ This point has recently been argued again

by Littlewood (2002), who argued that self-harm in the UK could be understood as a means by which the socially 'subdominant' can challenge the dominant.

Although reporting on suicide in widely different societies from across the world, each of these studies have nevertheless approached the subject from very similar angles and come up with very similar explanations. First, they, like Malinowski, have tended to dismiss Durkheim's theory of suicide as being inapplicable in different cultural contexts to the one in which it was created.⁴ The terms 'egoism,' 'altruism,' 'anomy,' and 'fatalism' have been argued as having no local equivalent in non-European societies, even when discussing suicidal behaviour in contexts of social change, which has of course been a perennial problem in the modernising and globalising locations where anthropologists have worked. As such, it has been difficult for anthropologists completely to dispense with Durkheim's notions of status change or status loss as implied by the theory of anomy, and in that sense Durkheim has tended to reappear via the back door. Nevertheless, the dramatic context of suicide as implied by anomic suicide has been replaced instead by a focus on the everyday occurrence of suicide, albeit often set against a backdrop of change.

A feature of the South Pacific studies has been precisely this sense of 'normalcy during crisis.' According to Marshall (1979: 78), suicide was during the middle of the twentieth century the leading cause of death for Micronesian men aged between 15 and 30 years; Rubinstein (1986 cited by Counts 1991: 217) reports that during the 1960s and 1970s the male suicide rate doubled every four years. While setting these rates within the context of social change, suicide too has been understood in relation to an apparently highly stable set of values concerning the expression of frustration and rage, especially towards elders (ibid: 218). Trukese suicide, for example, was found by Hezel (1985: 115-116) to occur in the context of conflict between family members that were antagonised by change but regulated

⁴ Bohannan argued a slightly different point, suggesting that Durkheim combined with Malinowski's theory of the social institution made for the best approach to suicide.

by feelings of ‘*amwunumwun*,’ a mixture of anger, frustration, and resentment that an individual feels towards higher status family members with whom one is in conflict (Counts 1991: 218). As Hezel (1985: 115-116) suggests: ‘*amwunumwun* is not intended principally to inflict revenge... but to dramatize one’s anger, frustration, and sorrow in the hope that the present situation will soon be remedied... Suicide, in the overwhelming majority of Trukese cases, must be understood as a kind of *amwunumwun*.’ The stresses and strains of abnormal social change are thus, in Trukese, lived through an established and perfectly ‘ordinary’ social and emotional way of being, of which suicide becomes just another example.

Secondly, by working with and through local terms and conceptions, not only of ‘suicide’ but of associated notions of self, personhood, and sociality, anthropologists who study suicidal behaviour avoid always having to think in terms of ‘self’-harm and ‘self’-inflicted death – as well as the underlying assumption of ‘self-murder.’ Although we inevitably seem to choose those ‘technical’ translations when writing up our data, the formative experiences gained in the field when working in the vernacular seems to be enough to resist the urge to individualise *a priori* a suicide death. What the existing ethnography seems to suggest is that just as, if not more, important than the ‘self’ is the ‘other,’ in that what one person does to him or herself, he or she does to other people – both the causes and consequences of suicidal behaviour are *relational*. While this is not to deny the ‘self’ in its many various guises, and nor indeed to suggest that in some places it’s only ever about the ‘other’ – we agree with that growing number of scholars who argue that the distinction has been overdrawn in both directions (e.g. Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2011a, 2011b; Spiro 1993; Staples 2003) – it is to argue that one of the most important lessons that the anthropology of suicidal behaviour has to offer is that the act occurs within a nexus of bodies and relationships, in which ‘self’ and ‘other’ provides some form for meaning but always collapse back into each other, while also being designated and defined *by* acts of suicidal behaviour.

In trying to understand suicide in this way, anthropologists might well be accused of doing what psychologists, psychiatrists, and other outsiders do. While the latter transform quotidian experience by ‘medicalising’ it, anthropologists, as Kleinman (1995: 96) points out, are in danger of ‘anthropologising’ it. One way of confronting this issue, and broadly the approach taken here, is to interpret meaning not through external categories – except to the extent that those categories also shape the experiences of those we work with – but in terms of their own, emic categories and logics. Such a task is never straightforward, as our discussion above about the relationship between the etic and the emic makes clear, and reflection on how much we achieve this is anyway perhaps more valuable than a counsel of perfection. Nevertheless, the most obvious and most successful way of achieving it is to locate our studies of suicide within wider long term ethnographic engagements with the places in which those suicides take place. Each of the authors of the second set of papers attempt precisely that. Significantly, they find that their analyses *do* – for all the specificities they painstakingly tease out – draw them back to the anthropological interest in suicide as a kind of social action, communication, and protest.

Imberton’s contribution, on suicide among the Mayan-Chol indigenous people of Southern Mexico comes first, in part because it offers a bridge from the universalising taxonomies that Chua and Widger describe to the more locally specific explanations that account for self-inflicted deaths. While official taxonomies are fixated on the autonomous suicidal individual, the Chol, Imberton tells us, perceive themselves not as individuals but as constituted of numerous animic entities. As such they were vulnerable to a range of supernatural beings and forces, including witchcraft, which acted upon them and shaped their intentions. A death that might officially be classified as self-inflicted, for example, for the Chol might be attributable to external forces over which the individual had no control. What is interesting here, however, is how, in the rapidly changing social context in which the Chol

live, individualised explanations of suicide – blaming family problems, responses to incurable diseases, or disagreements over inheritances, for instance – have also become prominent, but without supplanting supernatural explanations. Rather, the Chols appear to have expanded their repertoire of explanatory models, drawing upon different explanations in different contexts or, sometimes, combining apparently contradictory notions on an *ad hoc* basis in order to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable.

Stories of suicides, then, also tell stories about social groups in flux, while providing a means by which social groups can, in turn, tell stories about themselves living through a time of flux. For the Chols, the necessity of economic migration, exposure to consumerism, and state involvement in such areas as education and transport infrastructure, have collectively transformed their ways of living and, consequently, exposed them to alternative modes of explaining death. That radical social change emerges as a dominant motif in this and several of the other papers is not, we suggest, a coincidence, particularly in light of existing research that connects neoliberalism to a rise in particular kinds of suicide (Chua 2011; Livingston 2009; Parry 2012; Staples 2012b). While social change and suicide are, as Durkheim foresaw, related, the ways in which they interact are complex and not always predictable.

For Billaud, whose paper follows Imberton's, the upheaval caused by the current war in Afghanistan is seen as opening up new spaces in which discontent can be voiced in culturally intelligible expressive forms. Greater freedoms, paradoxically, have led to higher numbers of women committing suicide; because, in part, it offers for the first time a culturally-acceptable way through which women might protest against those same social values. Suicide attempts and self-harm are, she argues, facets of the 'art of the weak' (de Certeau 1984). For the college students of Billaud's paper, however, those suicide attempts also index the difficulty, for women in particular, of re-imagining themselves in a newly liberalised urban space at dissonance with the expectations of their families and communities.

As was the case for the Chol, stories of suicide in Afghanistan tell us not simply about deaths, but communicate narratives of dramatic social change.

The dissonances Billaud captures so well are evident in other places where suicide rates are rising too, as Kral's ongoing collaborative research among young Inuit in Nunavut, Canada, makes clear. In a contribution which also explores alternative ways of carrying out suicide research (see below), Kral argues that social changes imposed by an external cultural force – in this case the Canadian Government – have diminished the social functions previously met by Inuit social institutions, including kinship ties and particular styles of parenting. Inuit practices have been challenged, for example, by the imposition of the Canadian education system. As Kral also argues, however, responses to such impositions must take full account of cultural specificities if they are to succeed in their own terms of reducing suicide rates, and anthropologists are uniquely positioned to explain such specificities to external agencies.

Social upheaval does not in itself increase the propensity for people to take their own lives, however, as Dabbagh's paper on suicide among Palestinians shows. In the case she describes, the backdrop is the turmoil wreaked by the intifada against Israeli military occupation of the Gaza strip and the West Bank, between 1987 and 1993. Although large numbers of people died during these uprisings, suicide rates among Palestinians were notably low during this period because, Dabbagh uses the ethnography to argue (here mirroring Durkheim), the intifada was socially unifying (see also Dabbagh 2005). In the years that followed it, however, the rate of suicides – as elsewhere, committed in response to the socio-economic, political and cultural specificities of Palestinians' everyday lives – climbed back up. And like those cases described by Imberton, Billaud, and Kral, the overriding explanations given for such acts, despite the fact that they were carried out in socially specific ways in response to very particular sets of circumstances, were strikingly uniform. People

took their own lives as a means of escape and protest – albeit about a range of different social problems – when they were denied the agency they might otherwise draw upon to manage those problems. Imberton's Chol informants escaped catalogues of everyday troubles and, sometimes, expressed their anger by committing suicide. For the students Billaud encountered in Kabal, meanwhile, poetry (in its various forms) and suicide or self-harm are presented as the only viable media through which young women might communicate their distress. The Inuit youth of Kral's descriptions, too, expressed their frustrations at the parents from whom they had been alienated by killing themselves in formulaic ways. And for the protagonists for Dabbagh's evocative case studies, suicide becomes an option when other, everyday, forms of protest are ignored.

For Niehaus's informants in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, protest also featured high in popular explanations of suicide, particularly among women who, he found, killed themselves in protest against the worst excesses of masculine domination. What he also demonstrates, however, is that suicidal behaviours are shaped not only by class identity, as we have already seen, but by gender. Men, he argues, commit suicide not so much in protest as to escape the constraints of masculine expectations. While one might quibble over the distinction between 'protest' and 'escape' – could men, for example, also be characterised as protesting against the norms to which they are expected to conform? – the significant points here, and those which tie a common thread through all the papers in this section, are: a) that age cohorts, gender, and class – as well as all the other identity categories people live by, and which our contributors draw out so effectively – are important in understanding how suicide might be interpreted in particular locations; and b) that – despite the socio-cultural specificities that ethnography throws light upon – under-lying explanations for suicide are remarkably similar across diverse contexts.

We might, of course, argue that we find commonalities both because we define suicide in a particular way and because we use particular anthropological categories – akin to the official taxonomies critiqued in the opening papers – to understand them. To put it another way, if we look for explanations for suicide in terms of, say, protest, then we are likely to find them. It is important to remain alert to the possibilities of such traps, but this is not, we would argue, a valid criticism here. Indeed, in all the papers in this volume there is evidence of a concerted effort to chronicle the *specific*: to interpret individual cases of what have been locally defined as suicides in terms both of proximate circumstances – understood through rich ethnographic understanding of the locales in question – and the wider, but still local, background of economic and political events, from war and popular uprisings to heavy-handed government interventions. There is also a sustained attempt to analyse findings in terms of informants’ own categories, with careful attention to the idioms through which suicide acts are responded to. And yet, even when we work against the grain in actively seeking out difference – a point well made by Parry (2012) in his study of suicide in the steel-town of Bilai, central India – we still keep returning to the same broad classifications.

It is true, of course, that acts which might be referred to in, say, Britain, as suicides, in some of the other places encountered in this volume might be understood as something altogether different (although Owens’ and Lambert’s work on suicide in the UK – this volume – also challenge those taken-for-granted British classifications). Willerslev’s (2009) argument that what are officially classified as suicides among the Chukchi of Northern Siberia are, in fact, better understood as blood sacrifices – a ritual inversion of suicide – springs to mind in particular, and, in this volume, both Dabbagh (with her reference to so-called ‘suicide bombers’ in west Asia; see also Asad 2007; Hage 2003) and Imberton (whose informants differentiated between suicides and deaths caused by, for example, witchcraft)

likewise problematise the notion of suicide. But even in these contexts, there are also deaths that are locally explained with reference to more generalisable categories.

Could it be that to kill oneself – regardless of whether one is held individually responsible for that act of otherwise – is universally seen as such a powerful act of destruction that cross-cultural nuances in what those acts might mean are over-shadowed by what they have in common? Or might it also be that the official taxonomies we critique in the opening papers have become sufficiently hegemonic to obscure difference? The answer, in both cases, must be a qualified yes, although this should encourage us to explore even more closely the ways of which these similarities are different. We also need to be alert to the fact, as Widger's paper makes clear, that superficially similar categories might be understood very differently by, for example, psychiatrists and the lay people who make use of them in everyday life.

Regaining control – limiting the impact of suicidal behaviour

What is also interesting is that, whatever those who kill themselves intend – consciously or otherwise – to communicate by ending their lives, meaning is not fixed at the point of death, simply waiting to be read, but continues to be made through events that follow. This is, broadly speaking, what the remaining papers explore (even though there should be no absolute distinction between the papers in the previous section, which – by necessity – also draw on the perspectives of those left behind, after the suicide has taken place). What these papers demonstrate is how people after the fact seek to limit the efficacy of suicide, or their own responsibility for the suicide, and thus transform, or perhaps create afresh, meanings and popular readings of suicide.

Owens and Lambert, firstly, draw on interviews with relatives of 100 people from the southwest of England whose deaths were recorded as suicides, to explore how the past is

reconstructed by those left behind. In addition to highlighting – like Niehaus – stark differences in how the suicides of men and women are made sense of, they also show the work done both to preserve the moral integrity of the deceased that may have been threatened by the suicidal act, and to remove any suggestion of their own culpability that the act might have implied. Women’s suicides, for the most part, are pathologised and explained with reference to mental illness. Male suicides – explained in more heterogeneous terms – are often talked about with reference to possession-like states (an explanation that parallels – and thus challenges again a simplistic ‘west versus the rest’ dichotomy, or the ‘culture of suicide’ view – those given by the Mexican Chol of Imberton’s description), or the victims are cast in the role of tragic hero.

For Toulson, whose fieldwork focuses on funerals and mortuary practices in Singapore, the reconstruction of the past alluded to in Owens’ and Lambert’s paper is even more explicit. Here, through the performance of funeral rituals, relatives of the deceased often play out a performance designed to silence, or at least obscure, whatever message the original suicide might have been said to convey, and, like Owens’ and Lambert’s informants, shifts blame for the death away from themselves. At their most successful, a funeral might even redefine the death as an unfortunate accident rather than a suicide at all, marking out an alternative – more idealised – life path for the deceased. The suicide of an elderly woman that might have marked her son as unfilial – given that suicides here, too, were read as protests – was re-scripted by her descendants as a ‘good death’ through public rituals, while the body of a student who had escaped the pressures of life by jumping from a balcony was sent into the afterlife with the burning of a paper replica of a graduation gown and degree diploma. Such reconfiguring of deaths, as in the cases Chua described in Kerala, depends on the varying capacities of those left behind to shape events, but they also show, as Toulson points out, the spaces within apparently rigid rituals for innovation and communication.

Finally, Picone's paper, in drawing our attention to the role of popular religion in making sense of suicides in Japan, also takes us beyond the event of the death itself, as well as dovetailing nicely with the papers that opened the collection by referring back to the broad taxonomies through which suicides are officially classified. She begins with the assertion that the categories that have dominated research on suicide in Japan – drawn both from Durkheim's typologies and Ruth Benedict's setting out of broad cultural patterns in her best-selling ethnography *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (2006) – have blinded scholars to the quotidian explanations drawn upon in everyday life. As was the case for those Toulson worked with in Singapore, for many Japanese people, Picone tells us, a suicide is a 'bad death', with the spirits of the deceased consequently remaining close to the world and causing problems for the living. This is not, she demonstrates, simply a mythical construction, but is taken literally in ways that has very real implications for the living. Estate agents, for example, claim they are unable to sell properties in which a person has committed suicide because people fear that the spirit will remain, and landlords have even gone as far as attempting to claim lost rent from the kin of suicide casualties, on the grounds that they can no longer let the property. Here, it might be argued, the narrative not only continues after the suicide – as set out so neatly in Owens' and Lambert's and Toulson's papers – but shapes the context in which subsequent suicides take place, since people can foresee the ways in which their deaths might be interpreted. It also throws light on why the families Toulson describes go to such lengths to present the suicides of their kin in more favourable light.

From the ground up

Widger recalls the concern of one psychologist he spoke to before starting his doctoral fieldwork, who wondered what an 'ethnographic study of suicide' might look like. Ethnography, understood as long term participant observation in and of the lives of ordinary

people in one small place (or places) over the period of one or two years, is not, of course, immediately amenable to the investigation of suicide. Even in contexts in which suicide rates are very high, the likelihood of being in the presence of someone attempting suicide remains low, and taking notes in the event of such an occurrence might anyway throw-up some awkward ethical dilemmas. All that we might hope for then – beyond interviewing those left behind – is to interview survivors sometime after the fact. By definition, however, such people did not commit suicide but ‘attempted’ it – something which, as shown in this volume, can often be a very different thing.

Yet by exactly the same token anthropologists do not – and cannot – become fixated with ‘the individual case study’, even though ‘case studies’ will remain a valuable empirical tool. Our view must be broadened, to take into account the whole gamut of social contextual and conditional issues. We learn about how suicidal behaviours are imagined, talked about, and practiced; how they relate to other kinds of behaviours and other kinds of institutions; when and under what possibilities different people in the communities we study think suicide might arise and when it might not, when it might be ‘acceptable’ and when it might not; and how suicidal behaviour does not begin with the ‘precipitating factor’ and end with the ‘suicidal act,’ but extends deep into individual and collective pasts and futures. It is the overall logics of the suicidal situation that we become versed in – wherein social and psychological factors collide – and become adept at talking about. We ‘internalise’ the very same chunks of cultural knowledge (Bloch 1998: 16) that direct our informants’ understandings of what suicidal behaviour is, learning, to borrow from Kral (1998), to die as *they* have lived.

So *how* have they lived? Each of the papers in this volume have engaged with questions such as these through the use of ethnographic research methods that have allowed for the study of suicide ‘in the whole,’ which is to say from our informants’ points of view.

Chua's following of the relatives of suicide victims as they passed through, and came up against, the state institutions and professionals who manage the interpretation and fate of dead bodies; Widger's comparisons between popular descriptions of suicide and those found in government archives, literature, and new policy, and the struggles over definition that ensue; Imberton's tracing of explanations for suicide back to the ethnography of Chol notions of agency and personhood, and from there to political economy; Billaud's recourse to poetry, legends, and myths, in the context of a nation coming to terms (once again) with itself in a 'post-war' era; Dabbagh's work with young Palestinians who were coping too with despair in a post-Intifada setting; Niehaus's ethnographic analysis of men and women in a context of social change, in which notions of masculinity have fallen out of step with prevailing conditions; Owens' and Lambert's problematisation of *post-hoc* rationalisations for suicide; and Picone's examination of popular religion.

The method was taken to its most extreme by Kral, who employed a 'community-based participatory action research model.' Some informants became co-researchers, and were involved in the work 'from the generation of research questions to conducting interviews, co-interpreting the stories and contexts, and being involved in dissemination from community level to government to publications' (Kral this volume). While many anthropologists employ informants as research assistants (although perhaps do not always acknowledge their contribution to the extent they should), and, more informally, always have informants who help them to make sense of the data they gather as part of the overall research process (it is for this reason that 'abstracted' anthropological theories so often reflect the folk theories of the people that anthropologists study), the self-consciously collaborative efforts implied by the model demonstrates how understandings of suicidal behaviour arrived at by ethnography mirror informants' understandings so well.

At the beginning of this introduction we argued that a ‘universalist’ view of suicide seemed appropriate, given the broadly similar ‘causes’ that are reported the world over. However, we also said that it was the mechanism of this apparent universalism in which we were interested, rather than the specific categories of suicide *per se*. As an act that is deeply embedded in forms and patterns of relatedness and plays with what Sahlins (2011*a*, 2011*b*) has recently called the ‘mutuality of being,’ suicidal behaviour at once makes claims on and rejects human sociality – in a very real sense, we argue, ‘suicide creates as much as it negates’ (Widger 2009; this volume). The theoretical opportunities and challenges that emerge from this volume are thus ones that establish suicidal behaviour as a kind of sociality in its own right – as a way of making and breaking social relationships, and experiencing, thinking about, and ultimately explaining and shaping the world around us. As Widger (this volume) argues, we ‘live by suicide as much as we might die by suicide,’ and this approach opens up the study of suicide to entirely new horizons.

Suicide is situated within the complexities of real life in real places; ‘suicide’ is never just its own category but is bound up with, defined by, and experienced through, other kinds of social practices, contexts, and conditions. For this reason, of course, we *have* engaged with classic themes in the sociology and psychology of suicidal behaviour – definitions of suicide, suicide as a kind of communication, suicide in the context of social change, suicide in the context of social and psychological distress, and ways of resolving suicide – but from a different kind of perspective. We have focused on how, through the empathetic (in the sense that it communicates with other people) as well as emphatic nature of suicidal behaviour, suicide exists within bodies and communities, highlighting the links that exist between people as well as the ultimate frailty of those links – ‘what I do to myself I do to you, and what I do denies the bonds between us,’ could be one way of posing it; yet, the opposite also holds true – ‘what I do affirms the bonds between us.’

* * * *

The final word in this volume goes to Jean La Fontaine: an anthropologist who began her academic career more than half a century ago with her first paper on suicide in Bohannan's pioneering collection, *African homicide and suicide* (1960) and who, from that lofty vantage point, reviews the collective contribution of the papers described above in an Endnote to the collection. Revisiting Durkheim – as Bohannan's contributors did – she demonstrates how the papers here not only nuance and critique Durkheimian perspectives on suicide, but suggest valuable alternatives, both methodologically and theoretically. The idea that a society can be represented by a single view of suicide, as she puts it, is demolished by the work of this volume: the only one of its kind – so far – to compare suicide, ethnographically, across the globe. In doing so, this collection shifts discussion of suicide away from the assumption – which has strait-jacketed thinking in suicidology – that suicidal acts are caused, at root, by psychopathologies such as depression. Suicide is a social rather an asocial act, caught up within the social relationships within which people live and die, and in that sense can be understood too as a social relationship in its own right. Ethnographic studies of suicidal behaviour can demonstrate the enormous significance of thinking about suicide in this way. We hope that in so doing this volume helps to place the study of suicide within anthropology on a much firmer footing than has previously been the case, while also engaging the interest of suicidologists too.

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